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Committee on Conferences
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Draft report

Addendum

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II. Calendar of conferences and meetings

C. Improved utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities

Introduction and overview

1. At its 443rd and 444th meetings the Committee considered the report of the Secretary-General on improving the performance of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services (A/57/289). In introducing the report, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management said that the bold, creative ideas set forth in the report were part of the comprehensive new round of reform for a rejuvenated Secretariat and represented the Department's efforts to change its culture as well as its structure. It intended to become proactive, staying on top of events rather than at their mercy, through upstream planning, and to operate as an integral whole to achieve full-system benefits, making good use of technological advances. The Department aimed at a cost-neutral reform, with redeployment of resources where they would produce the greatest value.

Discussion

Repositioning the Department

2. The view was expressed that the creative and forward-looking proposals contained in the report could significantly change the situation. Several delegations commended the frank self-criticism contained in the report and the evident determination of the Secretariat to address the problems identified. So far the analysis and reforms related primarily to Headquarters, and the exercise should be extended to other duty stations, in part to realize the benefits of integrated planning of meetings. The development of instruments and indicators to measure progress

would also assist the Committee. The Committee's task was not to micromanage or to second-guess the Secretary-General but to monitor results.

3. Support was expressed for the proposed forward-planning arrangements with the President of the General Assembly and committee chairpersons. The view was also expressed that the proactive role of the Secretariat should not interfere with the work of the legislative bodies.

4. The idea of making editorial support available at an early stage was commended. In response to questions about the proposals for restructuring editorial services, it was explained that the concept of pre-editing had three applications. First, it would be useful if the editors could work with author departments at an early stage. Second, for the sake of the efficiency of the whole system, documents should be edited prior to rather than parallel with translation. Third, the task of editing to ensure concordance between language versions of resolutions would be much better done before adoption rather than after, as in the present system, and that would require more editorial help to Member States during the informal consultations stage.

5. In response to queries about the rationale for the integration of the Fifth and Sixth Committee secretariats into the Department, it was explained that, in the earlier years of the Organization, technical secretariat support had been provided by the substantive departments. However, in the first round of reforms the Secretary-General had decided that the function of a committee secretary was more akin to conference servicing than to substantive support. Consequently, in 1997, the secretariats of all Main Committees except the Fifth and Sixth had been transferred to the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services. The experiment had proved successful, and therefore the decision had been taken to integrate the remaining two. Since the staff member serving as Secretary of the Sixth Committee had been performing both technical servicing and substantive functions, the technical secretariat function had been separated out for integration into the Department. The Secretary-General had the authority to restructure and regroup the Secretariat, but to the extent that those actions had an impact on the proposed programme budget, the General Assembly had the right of review.

6. The view was expressed that the new name, Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, was somewhat misleading, since it implied a greater authority than the Department actually had. "Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services Management" would be preferable. The view was also expressed that determining the name of the Department was within the purview of the Secretary-General.

Pursuing full-system benefits

7. The view was expressed that the approach taken towards achieving full-system benefits was a demonstration of leadership. The analysis should be expanded to other duty stations. In response to questions, it was explained that, at some point in the past, library services in New York had been transferred to the Department of Public Information but at other duty stations had remained part of conference services. What was found to work for New York was not always appropriate for Geneva, Nairobi or Vienna.

Integrating global management

8. At its 445th meeting, the Committee arranged a videoconference on the topic of integrating global management, in which the Director of the Conference Services Division at Geneva, the Acting Chief of Conference Services at Nairobi and the Chief of Conference Services at Vienna participated. The Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management, introducing the participants, explained that, although the Department had always placed great emphasis on coordination, recently interaction among duty stations had been greatly stepped up, both at the policy level, through videoconferencing and management retreats, and at the operational level, through nearly daily consultations. Nevertheless, more could certainly be done. The Committee was provided with statistics on vacancy rates at all duty stations.

9. The Committee then engaged in a question-and-answer session on the item with the representatives of the other duty stations, with specific emphasis on electronic management tools and systems for global management, customized information technology support and distance translation.

10. In the light of the statement in paragraph 33 of the report that the understanding of the Department's leadership role varied from duty station to duty station, some delegations questioned whether too much centralization might result in a lack of flexibility. It was explained that global management entailed not so much centralization as harmonization and consultation. Some members stressed the importance of extending the analysis and reform process to other duty stations. The Secretariat explained that the Department wished to follow the principle of subsidiarity, that is, to exercise policy leadership and ensure consistency in approaches, practices and principles, without interfering in the operational responsibility of the other duty stations.

11. In terms of specifics, the need to harmonize document-tracking systems and to profit from best practices was stressed, wherever developed. The Department should see to it that all duty stations were provided with adequate customized information technology support.

Alleviating the documentation situation

12. The view was expressed that a solution must be found to the problem of summary records being issued months and even years after a meeting was held, and thus being of little value to Member States. It was a problem for both Member States and managers of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services. The view was expressed that consideration could be given to the discontinuance of summary records. However, the view was also expressed that summary records provided a useful tool to Member States. It was suggested that the translators currently assigned to the production of summary records could be reassigned to more urgent translation tasks and their summary record functions assigned to other staff of the Department. The report of the Secretary-General suggested that digital recordings could be made of meetings, which could then be stored in a searchable online database. Members cautioned that a digital recording would not provide the synthesis that a summary record provided and that the element of analysis could not easily be replaced. It should also be asked whether the institutional memory of the Organization could be better preserved by using the current methods or by using new, electronic means of storing information.

13. The question was raised as to why verbatim records had not been included in the review by the Department and whether their continued production did not also constitute a waste of resources. It was pointed out, however, that the production of verbatim records was required by the rules of procedure of both the General Assembly and the Security Council and that it was not within the competence of the Secretariat to recommend their discontinuance. In any event, the production of verbatim records of the Security Council was not subject to the same delays as summary records and they were in fact a useful aid to members of the Security Council.

14. It was pointed out that the proposals concerning documentation that had been made were intended for implementation in New York in the first instance. If they proved successful, they could then be extended to other duty stations. It was recognized that Headquarters could learn from the best practices at other duty stations as well. The hope was expressed that all of the proposed reforms would be carried out on a cost-neutral basis.

Optimizing the use of technology

15. This item is reported on in the consideration of section V, "Information technology".

Measuring productivity with the current workload standards (annex I)

Discussion

16. The view was expressed that, while the current workload standards for translators, interpreters and text processors were inadequate — insofar as they measured only quantitative outputs and failed to take into account the quality of the work accomplished, the level of difficulty of the work, and other assignments such as reading background documents, learning new technologies and drafting summary records — some tool of measurement was needed for planning and budgeting purposes and in order to monitor performance.

17. The recently introduced system of results-based budgeting should offer novel ways of measuring the output of the Department. While the work done by translators and interpreters is clearly "intellectual work", it should still be subject to workload standards. It was pointed out, however, that the Department was not suggesting that workload standards be eliminated for translators and interpreters. It merely sought recognition of the highly complex and intellectual nature of the work performed and questioned whether output should be judged by purely mechanical means such as counting of the number of words translated. More complex tools of measurement were needed that would allow for a richer appreciation of what those jobs entailed, and programme managers should play a greater role in assessing productivity.

18. Attention was drawn to the potential impact of technological innovations, including computer-assisted translation, voice recognition and voice recording, on the productivity of translators and text processors. While some organizations had already been consulted, it might be useful to consult with a broader range of organizations that employ the services of translators, interpreters and text processors in order to exchange experiences and identify best practices with a view to determining the cost-effectiveness of the services provided.

19. It was pointed out that the current workload standards for interpreters had been established in negotiations with the Association of International Conference Interpreters and it might therefore be inappropriate to request the Department to even explore the possibility of changing those standards while that agreement remained in force. The most reliable indicator of the quality of interpreters' output was the feedback received from members of the bodies that were consumers of the services provided.

Streamlining the structure of the Department (annex II)

20. The Committee took note of the measures that the Department had introduced to streamline its structure, namely, making information technology a strategic asset, strengthening the documentation function, grouping meeting support functions, strengthening and integrating editorial support functions, and merging the reproduction and distribution functions.

21. It was also noted that the streamlining of its structure and changing of its name were within the exclusive purview of the Department, and that the Committee on Conferences should merely take note of the developments.

22. The hope was expressed that conference-servicing departments in other duty stations would take similar steps to streamline their structure.

Conclusions

23. **The Committee commended the Secretariat for the frank analysis of the conference-servicing operations, welcomed the creative solutions put forward and further welcomed the intention of the Secretary-General to implement, without delay, the measures falling under his authority as the chief administrative officer of the Organization.**

24. **The Committee noted the integration of the functions of the Fifth and Sixth Committee secretariats into the Department, and also noted that the transfer of resources between sections would appear in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005, for approval by the General Assembly.**

25. **The Committee requested the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly at its fifty-eighth session on possible alternatives to summary records, including, inter alia, replacing them with digital recordings, and to study also the possibility of using the same or similar alternatives for verbatim records.**

26. **The Committee requested the Secretary-General, when implementing the new slotting system for documentation submission, to bear in mind the existing rules on submission and issuance of documentation.**

27. **The Committee recognized that the functions performed by language services, including translation and interpretation, are of a complex intellectual nature and, noting the interactions between the various stages of processing documentation in the six official languages, and noting also that management should have an input in evaluating performance, agreed that the current workload standards needed to be reviewed. It recommended that the Secretary-General study the practice of other organizations and seek expert advice on**

how to better measure performance and customer satisfaction, and that he make proposals for the establishment of more meaningful workload standards.

28. **The Committee requested the Secretary-General to report, as a follow-up to document A/57/289, on how the reform initiative will involve the other major duty stations.**

29. **The Committee requested the Secretary-General, when further developing electronic tools in the context of management and conference servicing, to combine and utilize operational systems already in place so as to avoid duplications.**

30. **The Committee requested the Secretary-General to provide adequate specialized information technology services at all major duty stations.**